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Political Communication in Switzerland

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Switzerland is a small state (7.8 million inhabitants) with a liberal legal system and a capitalistic economic system. The media system is shaped by a prominent regional press and a strong public broadcasting sector. Until late into the 20th century, high political parallelism (external diversity) could be found in the print media. Newspapers cut their party ties only between 1970 and 1990 and today, where the press has generally become largely non-partisan, only few papers still reflect their historical roots in their commentaries. Furthermore, the print market is characterized by rising economic concentration, especially at the regional level. The broadcasting sector is dominated by the Swiss Radio and Television Corporation (SRG), a typical exponent of European public service broadcasting. It is independent of the state, financed through licence fees and has a legal mandate to inform the public according to certain quality standards. Commercial broadcasting remains weak and competition from the public broadcaster comes mainly in the form of foreign channels beaming into the Swiss market. Professionalization of journalism is traditionally not too strong compared with other countries, with journalism schools and journalist unions only beginning to emerge in the second half of the 20th century. Only few Swiss journalists identify with active, critical role perceptions or the ideal of a watchdog press. Current media regulation guarantees basic freedoms and imposes strict limits on the state's ability to constrain media independence, but it also reflects the government's intention to maintain its authority to broadly influence the basic regulatory parameters (Marcinkowski 2007). Delayed journalistic professionalization and a welfare approach toward media regulation have also worked against current trends such as commercialization, attack journalism and personalization, although they are on the rise in Switzerland albeit at a lower level than in some neighbouring countries. Taken together, these characteristics are rather typical of Northern-European countries where media systems follow the democratic-corporatist model as described by Hallin and Mancini (2004).

According to Blum (2005), five characteristics of the country's political system have an impact on Swiss political communication: (1) Switzerland is a multilingual country and its three largest language areas (German-, French- and Italian-speaking) are also carriers of cultural elements imported from the big neighbouring countries Germany, France and Italy. This has also affected political journalism and political communication in these areas; one could even say that Switzerland consists of three media markets with slightly different journalistic cultures. (2) Switzerland is a federal state with 26 politically fairly autonomous cantons. This has favoured a decentralized media market, regionally based journalism and a regionally based

party structure. Election campaigns are only loosely coordinated nationally – thus showing a lower level of campaign professionalization than other countries. (3) Switzerland is a direct democracy where people co-determine policy decisions through their participation in regular referendums and initiatives (at least four times per year). Prior to each public vote, intense issue campaigns take place which challenge the news media to explain the matter at hand in substantive terms, explain the contrasting policy options proposed, and foster deliberation. (4) Switzerland is a consensus-oriented country following a concordance model: all main parties are involved in the government; there is no division between government and opposition; no president or prime minister determines the political direction. A panel of seven persons who are nominated by the various parties takes over all the ministries and – as government – takes all decisions collectively. These features coincide with a highly consensual, pluralist and discourse-oriented focus in news reporting, showing comparatively little use of opinion polls and negative campaigning. (5) Switzerland has a decentralized structure. There is no political centre and while Berne as capital is home of most political institutions, Zurich is the media capital and other economic and academic centres are spread over the whole country. This means that regional perspectives are over-emphasized in Swiss political communication.

The Swiss media system is characterized by small, segmented markets with comparatively weak resources and low advertising incomes. Nevertheless even local dailies with circulations between 15,000 and 35,000 copies per day show respectable quality. Despite growing concentration there is still a wide diversity of newspapers ensuring pluralism of political viewpoints. Also, the national public broadcaster (despite competition from popular foreign channels) shows high quality in news reporting and multilingual programming. Smaller regional programs are subsidized to help preserve their local identities and informational needs. Despite being satisfied with their national media offerings, the Swiss audience is strongly oriented towards their neighbouring countries. Most people watch foreign TV entertainment programs and buy foreign press products. This means that Swiss political journalism has lost its monopoly of national news attention.

Those characteristics have *implications* for the research agenda on Swiss political communication. Although many trends are essentially global in nature, their concrete manifestations are heavily influenced by the specific contextual conditions of the Swiss national communication arrangement. Any political communication scholarship is thus well advised to take into account the institutional framework conditions, both structurally and culturally, that make this country – at least in the eyes of the Swiss – a special case.

Further reading

Blum, R. (2005). Politischer Journalismus in der Schweiz [Political Journalism in Switzerland]. In P. Donges (Ed.), *Politische Kommunikation in der Schweiz [Political Communication in Switzerland]* (pp. 115-130). Bern, Switzerland: Haupt.

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Marcinkowski, F. (2007). Media System and Political Communication. In U. Klöti, P. Knoepfel, H. Kriesi, W. Linder, Y. Papadopoulos, P. Sciarini (Eds.), *Handbook of Swiss Politics*, 2nd edition (pp. 381-402). Zurich, Switzerland: NZZ Publishing.